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AL'S MOTORS, 3910 WILSON BOULEVARD, ARLINGTON COUNTY, VA (000-7381)

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The automobile showroom originally known as Al's Motors at 3910 Wilson Boulevard in Arlington County, Virginia, was constructed in 1948 to the architectural specifications of J. Raymond Mims. The property was owned and operated by Al and Bertha Wasserman, who ventured into the automobile business in the early 1920s. The two-story masonry building, prominently located at the major transportation crossroads of Ballston, housed an automobile showroom and service garage promoted as a modern scientific auto-lab. The well-executed details of Al's Motors, its rounded glass curtain walls and metal cornice, glass block sidelights and transom, and horizontal string courses and banding, make the building an excellent example of Streamline Moderne architecture. The level of stylistic ornamentation and materials presented on each of the elevations takes advantage of the property's corner site and reflects the three separate activities of the automobile dealership and service garage, resulting in a high-style façade along Wilson Boulevard, secondary façade fronting North Pollard Street, and tertiary elevations surrounded by paved lots. In 1968, the building was enlarged at the rear by the construction of a one-story addition, used as a paint shop. Al's Motors was the oldest Chrysler-Plymouth dealership in Northern Virginia at the time it closed in April 2001, thirty-seven years after the death of Al Wasserman. Despite its change in use, Al's Motors retains sufficient integrity of design, workmanship, materials, location, and feeling to reflect its original use as a mid-20th-century automobile showroom and service garage. The high-style Streamline Moderne building at 3910 Wilson Boulevard is eligible for its high-style architectural design under criterion C.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Al's Motors and the Wassermans

Al and Bertha Wasserman, the founders of Al's Motors, started in the automobile industry in the early 1920s with the purchase of the gasoline station at 322 West Wilson Boulevard in Arlington, Virginia. The service station was originally owned and operated by George

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Wasserman, Al's brother, who also used the property to sell crystal radio sets. The success of radio sets led him to sell the station and start George's Radio and Television, Inc.¹ Recognizing the future of the automobile, especially in central Arlington, the Wassermans expanded their business with the purchase of an automobile franchise from the Hupp Motor Car Company. Founded in 1908 and based in Detroit, Michigan, the Hupp Motor Car Company launched a major expansion in the late 1920s with the Hupmobile. The Hupmobile, with its low price owing to increased production, appeared to be an attractive automobile for the Arlington consumer and a wise business investment for the Wassermans.

In 1929, the Wassermans arranged to sell Chryslers and Plymouths through local distributor, H.B. Leary. H.B. Leary, Jr. & Brothers, located in Washington, D.C., was the area's leading Chrysler-Plymouth distributor. Leary received all deliveries from the Detroit-based Chrysler Corporation, which was founded in 1925 and included 3,800 dealers in the U.S. by the end of 1925.² Local dealers, like Al and Bertha Wasserman, purchased the cars and service parts from Leary for resale. In 1938, along with competitor Homer Bauserman of Bauserman's Service on Columbia Pike, the Wassermans became a Chrysler-Plymouth factory direct dealer.

With an expanding business and a growing staff, the Wassermans purchased the property at 3924 Wilson Boulevard in 1937 utilizing the building as an automobile dealership. The 1954 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map* documents that the building had a concrete and steel frame structure faced with brick on the Wilson Boulevard elevation. Following the construction of the more modern Streamline Moderne building at 3910 Wilson Boulevard, the industrial-looking building at 3924 Wilson Boulevard was used as an automobile repair facility and housed the auto greasing area, paint and parts area, and gas tanks.

In 1947, Chrysler began their "The Beautiful Chrysler" campaign. They hired fashion illustrator Frederick Siebel to create the graphics for this advertising, which focused on the elegant lines and luxurious interiors of their cars. This same theory of design, which was inspired by the automobiles Chrysler was producing at the time, was transferred to the automobile showrooms most often in the Streamline Moderne style of architecture. Accordingly, in 1948, the Wassermans commissioned architect J. Raymond Mims to design and construct a modern

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showroom and service garage that boasted the Streamline Modern elements, took advantage of the highly visible corner site, and would continue to meet the needs of the growing automobile industry. The contracting firm of Roystone, Grimm, and Sammons constructed the masonry building with high-style façade with aluminum detailing and string courses, visible showroom with rounded glass curtain wall, and red-brick service garage with barrel-vaulted ceiling and rows of industrial windows. Before construction started, the Wassermans were granted a variance from the Arlington Board of Zoning Appeals to construct their building at a setback of 35 feet from the center line of Wilson Boulevard instead of 40 feet, giving them greater exposure to Wilson Boulevard traffic.³

The location of the modern Streamline Moderne automobile showroom and service garage in central Arlington County by the Wassermans reflected the continuing commercial growth of Ballston and the advent of the automobile along such major transportation corridors as Wilson Boulevard and Glebe Road. Ballston had been the primary crossroads community in Northern Virginia since before the American Revolution (1775-1781). Known by a variety of names, including Birch's Crossroads, Thompson's Crossroads, and Ball's Crossroads, the intersection of Wilson Boulevard and Glebe Road was home to a tavern and blacksmith shop that served as the link to social as well as commercial activities. This crossroads community was a major thoroughfare for trade between riverside towns and the plantations and agricultural villages of Northern Virginia until the arrival of the railroad at the end of 19th century. An established village by 1874, the name was officially changed to Ballston in 1895. By the end of the 1800s, the Washington, Arlington and Falls Church Railroad carried commuters from Rosslyn to Ballston and Lacey Stations, traveling on to Falls Church and Fairfax Court House. The expansion of the railroad also brought about the development of planned community subdivisions and real estate sales in Ballston. An increase in the county's population, which was 6,430 in 1900 and 16,040 in 1920, was reflected in the growth of surrounding residential subdivisions like Ashton Heights and Arlington Forest.⁴

The existence of the automobile and the commercial nature of Ballston were firmly fixed by the middle part of the 20th century as automobile showrooms, gasoline stations, and repair garages soon lined Wilson Boulevard and Glebe Road. *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps* and the city

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directories document that Ballston was home to a growing number of such automobile-related buildings and structures. These included such commercial enterprises as Al's Motors at 3910 Wilson Boulevard, Bob Peck Chevrolet at 800 North Glebe Road, the American Service Center at 616 North Glebe Road, and the service stations at 849 North Lincoln Street, 904 North Kansas Street, and 3413 Wilson Boulevard. Additionally, in the years following World War II (1941-1945), the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority constructed a bus service and storage center at the intersection of North Randolph Street and Wilson Boulevard. One of the largest examples of the connection between commerce and the growth of the automobile in highly traveled crossroads of Ballston was the Parkington Shopping Center. Constructed in 1951, the Parkington was the area's first regional mall and catered to the automobile with the construction of a four-story parking facility at the rear. By 1954, the area immediately surrounding Al's Motors was home to numerous auto-related buildings including a filling station at 3902-3904 Wilson Boulevard, an auto repair facility at 3901 Wilson Boulevard, and an auto parts store at 3912 North 5th Road.

The success of the automobile business in Ballston was reflected in the advertisements of Al's Motors. Identified in the classified telephone directory as the Chrysler-Plymouth factory direct dealership, the 1950 listing boasted that Al's Motors maintained a "completely new and modern scientific auto-lab." Al's Motors, with consumer confidence in their technologically advanced facility, was able to provide new and used cars for sale, repair work, and replacement parts on-site and in a single building.

In keeping with Al's Motors' ability to do more than sell automobiles, a small rectangular wing at the southwest corner of the building was expanded in 1968. This section of the building housed a paint area, a use once relegated to the building at 3924 Wilson Boulevard. Drawings by architect Harvey L. Gordon note the installation of a "packaged" spray booth in the northwest corner of the addition. Unfortunately, owing to hazardous materials related to the use of the addition, Gordon's addition was demolished in 2001 and replaced with a new, higher structure with a similar footprint.

Following Al Wasserman's death in 1964 at the age of 64 and Bertha Wasserman's death in

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1985, Al's Motors continued to be owned and operated by the family until April 17, 2001, when it was sold to Health Club Investors, LLC. The deed of bargain and sale to Health Club Investors documents Al and Bertha Wasserman investment in the property where Al's Motors was located and the Ballston area in general. The Wassermans began purchasing property surrounding the intersection of Wilson Boulevard and North Pollard Street in the 1930s. Not only did they own and retain the properties at 3910 and 3924 Wilson Boulevard, but the Wassermans owned part of the property known as "South Ballston" located to the east of North Pollard Street. Additionally, they had interested in the property known as Spencer Roberts Addition (to the south) and part of Cyrus G. Rees lot (to the west). Although the Wassermans sold their Streamline Moderne showroom and service garage on Wilson Boulevard, the dealership known as Al's Motors continued. Al's Motors Incorporated joined Rosenthal Chevrolet/Jeep/Chrysler at the corner of Glebe Road and Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia.

Architects: J. Raymond Mims and Harvey L. Gordon

J. Raymond Mims

J. Raymond Mims was active in the field of architecture from 1913 until 1955. He designed a variety of buildings, including private residences, institutions such as churches and schools, and commercial projects with examples of banks, offices, and retail. As a partner in Mims, Speake & Co., Architects and Contractors, Mims worked on commissions such as the 1914 Rappahannock National Bank Office Building in Washington, D.C.; the 1915 Christ Episcopal Church in Luray, Virginia; and a 1929 High School in Luray, Virginia. Mims worked in Luray between 1931 and 1937, before relocating to Arlington by 1940. Al's Motors was not Mims's first Streamline Moderne-style building. Mims designed the Sligo Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland, which was completed in 1944. According to Hans Wirz and Richard Striner in *Washington Deco: Art Deco Design in the Nation's Capital*, Mims followed a strict use of streamline design for the church "with the exception of the depressed arches of the entrance arcade and the side-door lintels." Working with contractor Roystone, Grimm, and Sammons, J. Raymond Mims applied his skill with Streamline Moderne details to his 1948 commission for Al's Motors. With its curved edges, modern materials, and sleek horizontal banding Al's Motors is a fine example of Mims's design ability.

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Harvey L. Gordon

Architect Harvey L. Gordon was commissioned in 1968 by Al's Motors to alter the existing paint area at the southwest corner of the building. From his office at 1740 N Street, N.W. in Washington, D.C., Gordon produced plans to expand the existing double-height paint area approximately 6'-0" to the west and approximately 26'-4" to the north. When originally constructed, the south elevation of the addition incorporated a relocated overhead door, the west elevation was built with a reused metal window, and the north wall had a double-leaf door opening to the west that led to the spray paint booth and a relocated overhead door to the east. The addition was built with a concrete floor and concrete block walls faced with brick on the exterior. Exposed steel joists supported the roof. According to the building plans, the interior was painted. A "packaged" spray booth was located in the northwest corner of the addition. Unfortunately, owing to hazardous materials related to the use of the addition, it was demolished in 2001 and replaced with a new, higher structure with a similar footprint.

Streamline Moderne

The automobile showroom at 3910 Wilson Boulevard is one of the most architecturally significant commercial buildings in Ballston. The building, located on a corner lot along a primary transportation corridor, was designed in the Streamline Moderne style of architecture to attract passing motorists and express its function through ornament and form. The fashionable architectural style, dominant from 1930 to about 1955, "was an essay in streamlined geometry, stripped of ornament except for an occasional frieze of horizontal grooves designed as speed lines."⁵⁵ The style expressed an economy of lines and applied ornamentation while catering to the growing fascination of aerodynamic speed and the romance of transportation.

The Streamline Moderne style demonstrated a direct aesthetic transfer, or borrowing, of a design technique known as streamlining from automobiles and other transportation machines to the roadside buildings that served these machines. Auto part outlets, service stations, car dealerships, and tire stores were among the roadside buildings created to serve the automobile, and the streamlining of these buildings advertised their automobile-oriented function. Speed

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lines--horizontal bands of thin parallel lines--added to the illusion of movement by accentuating the streamlined contours of the building. These lines, together with swooping, aerodynamic forms, and sleek veneers symbolized modernity, progress, and efficiency. Automobiles and the buildings that were associated with them shared a dynamic, flowing aesthetic of slick skin surfaces, rounded corners, and a sensation of movement. This was achieved not only by similar design aesthetics, but also by similar materials. Automobiles and auto-oriented buildings used the same industrial materials of steel, glass, and chrome tubing – hard, shiny, slick surfaces that were novel and modern. The well-executed details of Al's Motors, its rounded glass curtain walls and metal cornice, glass-block sidelights and transom, and horizontal string courses and banding, make it an excellent example of Streamline Moderne architecture.

Original Floor Plan Design of Al's Motors

The interior of Al's Motors as originally designed was arranged according to function. The automobile showroom was sited at the north end of the building to take advantage of the property's prominent location on Wilson Boulevard. Office space and the parts department were located at the center of the building with the service garage at the rear.

The automobile showroom was an open, double-height space with a starburst-patterned terrazzo floor. The glass curtain wall wrapped around from the north façade to the west and east walls allowing a 180-degree view of Wilson Boulevard from the interior of the showroom. The south wall was finished with plaster and pierced at the west end with two door openings that led to closing offices. Large glass openings in the offices kept the salesmen in close contact with the customers. To the east of the closing offices along the south wall, a showcase was recessed into the wall, followed by a curved wall forming the information area with a rectangular counter.

The main corridor, lined with showcases and large glass openings, led to the parts department, business offices, and garage. The parts department was located on the west side of the building and the business offices were to the east. The parts department was housed in a large room with a counter at the south end, open to the garage. The cashier, aided by a safe, was located in the business office behind a glass wall with a waiting room accessible from a single-leaf door

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opening. Both the cashier and the waiting room had a view through large glass windows to the garage. A storage room for parts was located on the second floor, with the manager's office and segregated restrooms to the south. The second floor was also home to the president's office, lounge, conference room and kitchen.

The service garage was originally constructed as a double-height space with a concrete floor and exposed, arched steel trusses supporting the roof. Pneumatic and hydraulic lifts for vehicles were located along the east side of the garage. The addition was constructed in 1968 as a paint area. The double-height space was built with a concrete floor with concrete block walls faced with brick on the exterior and a roof supported by exposed steel joists. According to the building plans, the interior was painted. A "packaged" spray booth was located in the northwest corner of the addition.

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Chain of Title:

Lots 1 through 8 of the Subdivision of the Easterly Part of Lot 1 of the M.F. Birch Estate

April 17 th , 2001	Adolph Schick and Dorothy Schick to Health Club Investors, LLC Land Records of Arlington County Liber 3135 Folio 2196
April 22, 1988:	Adolph Schick and Dorothy Schick and Al's Motors, Incorporated (Deed of Partition) Land Records of Arlington County Liber 2324 Folio 1685
June 17, 1985:	Beverly Wasserman Talpalar and Jay Talpalar to Al's Motors and Dorothy Wasserman Schick and Adolph Schick Land Records of Arlington County Liber 2324 Folio 1673
June 13, 1985:	Will of Bertha Wasserman to Beverly Talpalar and Dorothy Schick Probate Records of Arlington County Liber 110 Folio 870

Lots 2 through 8 of the Subdivision of the Easterly Part of Lot 1 of the M.F. Birch Estate

April 6, 1945:	Nathan Miskin and Sarah Miskin to Albert Wasserman and Bertha Wasserman Land Records of Arlington County Liber 666 Folio 160
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June 6, 1938: Morgan W. Wayson, Mary E. Wayson, Henry C. Hopkins, and
Marie E. Hopkins to Nathan Miskin
Land Records of Arlington County
Liber 436 Folio 423

February 11, 1937: George L. Birch and Alice Lavenia Birch to
Morgan W. Wayson and Henry C. Hopkins
Land Records of Arlington County
Liber 406 Folio 148

Lot 1 of the Subdivision of the Easterly Part of Lot 1 of the M.F. Birch Estate

June 17, 1985: Beverly Talpalar and Jay Talpalar to
Al's Motors and Dorothy Schick and Adolph Schick
Land Records of Arlington County
Liber 2324 Folio 1678

June 13, 1985: Will of Bertha Wasserman to Beverly Talpalar and Dorothy Schick
Probate Records of Arlington County
Liber 110 Folio 870

April 10, 1937: Albert Wasserman and Bertha Wasserman to
Al's Motors, Incorporated
Land Records of Arlington County
Liber 409 Folio 575

August 21, 1934: George L. Birch and Lavenia Birch to
Albert Wasserman and Bertha Wasserman
Land Records of Arlington County
Liber 356 Folio 102

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Endnotes

¹ Elizabeth Roach, "Virginia Dealership: A Long Way from Crystal Sets," *The Star*, November 22, 1975.

² Chrysler Heritage, located on the internet at <http://www.chrysler.com/inside/heritage/index.html> on March 22, 2002.

³ "5 Pleas Granted by Zoning Board," *The Sun* (Arlington, VA), January 23, 1948.

⁴ Nan & Ross Netherton. *Arlington County in Virginia: A Pictorial History*. (Norfolk, VA: The Donning Co., 1987), p. 106.

⁵ Rachael Carley. *The Visual Dictionary of American Domestic Architecture*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994) p. 226.